

Negative Campaigning and the Morning After

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Barack Obama ran for president on, among other things, a promise to move the country beyond the partisan rancor of the Bush and Clinton years. Already observers are watching his every move to see if he will deliver on this promise. Obama has a difficult needle to thread because he not only has promised a less hyper-partisan approach than we have seen in recent years, but has also run on a progressive platform with regards to a range of issues including foreign policy, economic policy and the environment. Obama's challenge is to deliver on progressive policies while not creating a nasty political environment. In some respects this is the mirror image of the Clinton years where we had a nasty, partisan political environment, to which both parties contributed, but no genuinely progressive leadership from the White House.

Conservative commentators have been tempering their new found enthusiasm for an African American president with warnings of the need for Obama to be bipartisan and inclusive. The silence of these same people on this issue when George W. Bush was first elected in 2000 notwithstanding, there is something to these claims. The tasks that lie ahead for Obama are sufficiently daunting that he will benefit greatly by support and goodwill from both sides of the aisle. My sense is that Obama has the political savvy, judgment and political skills to achieve this goal, but it will not be easy.

If we are serious about moving the US into a post-partisan, or at least a less partisan, phase, it is neither fair, reasonable nor wise to place all the burden of doing this on the president-elect. We will not cast partisan rancor aside simply because a Democratic president appoints a few Republicans to high offices or even because that president brings a different tone to Washington.

One important component to reducing the aggressively partisan climate of American politics is to hold politicians, and others, accountable for their often hyperbolically divisive rhetoric and attempts to question the integrity and patriotism of their opponents. Politicians would be a lot less likely to use defamatory, vicious and untrue attacks if they knew they would be held accountable for what they said during the heat of campaigns. For example, John McCain's concession speech was certainly gracious, but perhaps we should pause a second from congratulating the senator from Arizona for the class he exhibited in conceding defeat to ask him about what he said during the campaign.

Imagine asking John McCain the following question "Senator McCain, during the campaign you repeatedly implied and said that President-elect Obama is a socialist. Given that beginning next year the president of the US will be a socialist, do you intend to support a guerrilla movement to restore capitalism in the US, accept that the US is now a socialist country or did you just lie about that to get elected?" The victors, of course, need to be held accountable as well, so a question for President-elect Obama might be "Do you really think that a surge like strategy in

Afghanistan will help the US fight global Jihad, or did you just say that to make yourself look tougher to the electorate?"

On one hand, this is taking "gotcha" journalism to an absurd level, but it is also an effort to rein in the claims, accusations and semi-truths which have come to dominate our campaigns. Candidates know that due to the healthy and almost natural urge for both winners and losers to be gracious and put the election behind them, the worst excesses of campaigns will be quickly forgotten, or at the very least, politicians know they will not be confronted about these things once the campaign is over. Thus, a decent and unifying impulse in the political class becomes a factor which enables the negative and divisive tones of our political campaigns.

While it certainly is important to put hard fought political campaigns behind us and move on to the even harder work of governance, putting the campaign behind us too quickly means that there are no consequences or disincentives for the often deeply troubling excesses of the campaign. It also suggests that months of angry rhetoric seeking to tap into the ugliest sentiments of the American electorate which we saw on display at Republican rallies in October, should be forgotten simply because of a nice concession speech. While very few people would actually enjoy watching John McCain squirm when being asked about why he didn't pause to reflect when a man he held in as high esteem as John Lewis criticized the racially divisive nature of the Republican campaign, it might give pause to other politicians before dragging their campaigns, and the national political dialog into the gutter.

Again, my goal is not to run salt into what are undoubtedly some painful wounds for John McCain and the Republican Party, nor to approach this in a partisan way, but to recognize that the almost anything goes nature of our political campaigns have a significant influence on our political culture more broadly and to create some ways of holding all politicians responsible for what they do in the heat of a campaign.